

Ambrosia by gb_lighthouse

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Summary:

After an hour and a few drinks, the ease between them returned so quickly it made Richie sweat. Because with the ease came the affection, as natural to him as laughter. It reminded Richie of old cartoons where the coyote runs off the cliff and is able to keep going until he's aware how far he's gone. Then it's hopeless.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Canon divergence: First half is in 1989 a month or so after the events of Chapter 1. Second half takes place a couple days after they return to the clubhouse in 2016 - Richie and Eddie haven't found their tokens yet and Pennywise hasn't terrorized them personally either. Also Richie didn't wear a jacket to Jade of the Orient.

I'm on tumblr at killhadrian.tumblr.com :)

They spill out of the classroom and it's like he can breathe again. Richie keeps his head bowed, swimming through kids rushing away from the building - to football practice, after school tutoring in the library, to make out with their girlfriends against the outer fence. Richie startles and clenches his fist in his shorts to keep his hand from touching his lip. It's swollen and tender and probably blue, if he had to guess. He didn't even get a good look at whoever slammed the locker door against his face. If he hadn't been cleaning his glasses they would've shattered, so there was that, at least.

He thinks he spots one of Bowers's gang - they started multiplying in his absence, and sometimes Richie doesn't recognize them as a threat until he's being slammed into a wall. He plays it safe and goes into the bathroom for fifteen minutes - pinching his nose shut and trying not to breathe in the fumes of shit and piss.

When he comes out the halls are mostly empty, his History teacher talking to a ninth grader who looks like he's about to cry in hushed tones. They make eye contact for a brief second and Richie knows that's another person he'll have to avoid the rest of the year. The only thing scarier than facing someone who's pissed is facing someone who's embarrassed. That's when the cruelty comes, that's when you're really sorry. Richie turns on his heels and makes for the double doors at the front. His lip pulses with heat and ache.

It's drizzling outside, a film of mist settling on top of backpacks,

sitting like jewels in the halo of frizz around the girls' heads. He thought the drops would land hissing on his skin he was so hot in his classroom, shoved into a front row seat next to the radiator. All his friends have gone home already, he's alone. Safe, and alone. Fine trade off.

Richie hates autumn, hates everything it represents. End of summer, freedom, fun, beginning of homework, obligations, miserable weather, shorter and harder days that all blend together. School is really the worst part. He could handle it if it weren't for the expectations. It's like since he has glasses, everyone - his parents, peers, teachers - thinks that he ought to at least be smart if he's going to look that nerdy. But he isn't smart, not really. He's C student smart and he'd be fine with it if it didn't reign constant disappointment down on him from all angles. He'd considered nipping the problem in the bud and getting contacts, but one mention of it to his parents and it was *God, Richard, your father and I work hard enough as it is, do you even know how expensive they are? You could try being a little more considerate for once.*

His shoes are soaked after only a block. He takes a left and then a right to go down Eddie's street because why not, it's a grid and it's on the way, sort of. What's he rushing home for, an empty house and homework he barely understands? He hates autumn. Even stepping on leaves is joyless, too soggy to crunch. He sees a blockade in the middle of the sidewalk a few yards ahead - a bright yellow lump curled up and swearing to itself. Richie smiles as he gets closer, slows down a little before he can notice.

“*Motherfucking gross, gross gross piece of shit—*“

“HEY there, Spaghetti!” Richie controls his laughter as Eddie jumps, water spraying Richie's legs as he whips around.

“Jesus, Richie, what the fuck is your problem?”

“What's *your* problem, Gorton?”

“What?”

“You know, the fish sticks guy?”

Eddie looks down at himself - he's wearing a raincoat and rain hat like he's about to brave a hurricane. *Cute*, Richie thinks. *Too fucking cute.*

"Fuck off, Richie. I'm not the one who's gonna die of pneumonia."

"Die of pneumonia? This isn't the 1600s, Eds, I'll be fine."

"You knew it was going to rain today, didn't you?"

"Dress for the weather you want, I always say." Richie tugs on his collar with a flourish. The print is some psychedelic theme - it was his dad's in the 60s - worn over a black tank top and khaki shorts. He had to make up a Biology quiz during lunch and therefore missed out on the gentle, defeated ridicule of the Losers. They already know he won't change. He can't. Even when he gets tripped and shoved in the hallways and called names for it, he still reaches for the same shirts in his closet every morning. It's a tamer portion of what makes him a loser.

"That makes absolutely no fucking sense, Richie." Eddie turns away and huddles over himself again.

"What are you even doing?"

"My stupid fucking shoelace is all knotted up and loose and now it's all wet and disgusting and I can't fucking —"

"Calm down, Eds, I got this." Richie drops to his knees, pulling the strings away from Eddie's delicate grasp. "It helps if you actually touch them."

"Fuck off," Eddie says, but it's soft as he concentrates on Richie's fingers.

He uses his fingernails to thread out the strings, dusted in mud and dirt. Eddie's nails are always cut down to the quick - *no room for anything to fester* - and he's useless to pick up anything with precision. Eddie's frustrated breath carries to Richie's cheeks. His glasses are fogging up but he's almost done anyway. When the strings are free he ties the shoelaces together again - neat and even, how he'll like it - and stands up.

"There ya go, little dahlin'," he croons. "Might I escort the lady home?"

Eddie rolls his eyes and shakes the water off his arms. They walk toward Eddie's house, Richie's arms swinging freely, Eddie's rigid at his sides.

"What happened to your lip?" Eddie asks.

"Oh this?" Richie touches the spot gingerly - it stings when he runs his tongue over it. "Your mom's a biter, did you know that?"

Eddie's foot catches Richie's leg mid-step and he trips, windmilling his arms to regain balance. When he looks back to Eddie, another joke about becoming his stepdad on Richie's tongue, Eddie's taking a tissue out of his fanny pack and cleaning off his shoe with it.

"You're completely filthy, you know. Just kneeling on the ground you probably got microscopic cuts that are being entered *as we speak* by millions of bacteria that are infiltrating..."

There's a spot on Eddie's face, a place that doesn't have a name just beside his lips that pulls and pinches when he's telling Richie to fuck off or calling him a dumbass or rattling off just how he's going to die. It's only visible for a split second, before it's covered up with a scowl or pulled wide by an insult, so fast you'd never notice if you weren't looking. That spot only shows itself again when he's smiling or laughing and forgetting himself. It's in-between. Richie would stop time just to look a little longer, keep him there before he slips far away into the now.

If anybody ever knew he thought things like that - about anyone - he'd never hear the end of it. Not just the taunts, but the shock, the disappointment, disgust of his friends. Better to be the trash mouth than for them to know the toxic, tainted things he kept shut up inside.

"Are you even listening?" Eddie jumps over a puddle and waves his arms for balance as he lands. Richie grabs his hand to steady him then drops it like it were a burning coal once he's stable.

“Sorry, sugar,” Richie says, exaggerating his southern drawl to ridiculousness. “I was so distracted by that pretty face of yours.”

“Eat shit, Rich.”

There we go, Richie thinks. All is right in the world again. Richie is a nuisance, Eddie is repulsed. He likes these affirmations when his brain gets ahead of itself, when he starts doing things without thinking that could be seen as the most frightening interpretation of all - earnest.

There’s a river washing across the sidewalk, mud from someone’s lawn mixing in with the stream and coloring the water murky black. It’s wider than they can jump. A wicked grin creeps onto Richie’s face.

“I swear to fucking god, Richie — ”

“What?” He feigns innocence. It doesn’t work, but it’s not supposed to.

“If even one centimeter of me touches that water, you’re dead, ok?” Eddie’s turned to him full on now, and Richie is hoping if he keeps smiling Eddie will get mad enough to hit him.

“How exactly do you plan to kill me, Spaghetti?”

“Don’t fucking call me that! And I’m gonna drown you, for your information.”

“You’re gonna drown me in three inches of water? Good luck, Kaspbrak.”

“Watch me, shithead.”

What follows could be generously called a scrap, but is closer to pawing at each other and shoving until Richie’s got a grasp around Eddie’s good arm - he always remembers not to fuck with the bad one - and is one good yank away from tossing him into the river’s path.

“Say uncle,” Richie sing-songs.

“Fuck you,” Eddie grunts and twists himself just so that he has enough distance from Richie to push him, hard, into the water.

Richie lands on his ass in the stream and immediately saturates his shorts straight through to his skin. Eddie starts to laugh until he realizes Richie isn't pouting. He's quiet, and Eddie only has a moment to cower before Richie slams his wide open palms onto the surface of the water - sludge and debris flying a perfect arc straight at Eddie.

He howls out a powerful *FUCK*, followed by a long stream of curses at Richie. Hands flailing, finger wagging, feet stomping, the works. The splash wetted the entire front of Eddie, brown and filthy and dripping. Richie stands - the splash had drenched the rest of him that had been dry - and approaches Eddie with open arms.

“Come on,” he says. “Let's hug it out.”

“Get the fuck away from me!”

“Let bygones be bygones, Eddie my man.”

He makes to wrap his arms around Eddie's shoulders who ducks under, something shaking in his voice that Richie hadn't heard.

“This isn't a fucking joke, Richie! I'm so screwed, so fucking screwed.”

“Jesus, calm down Eddie, it's just water.”

“It's not just fucking water, it's mud and dirt all over my pants. My mom is going to kill me. She bought these *yesterday*. Do you hear me? *Yesterday*. This is it, I'm never leaving the house again, she's gonna lock me in my room and — ”

“Hey, Eddie, Eddie calm down. It's gonna be ok.”

“You can't just say it's gonna be ok, that doesn't mean anything. You don't know her, you don't know—”

“Eddie!” Richie places his arms on Eddie's shoulders. He can't feel him really, not his skin or the heat he knows must be burning up his body, his face is flushed red. “Look at me, Eddie, it's gonna be fine.

Just come over to my house. You can use our washer and dryer and go home when it's done. You can borrow some of my clothes in the meantime."

"This is a rayon-linen blend, Richie, these are *dry clean only*, it's not going to work."

"It's better than showing up like this, right?"

Eddie looks at his legs. In the second before he looks up again, Richie sees the furrow in his brow, the true concealed panic hiding behind the tantrum. It's not that different to the faces he saw on Eddie that summer.

The memories fade and surge. When they're all together it's easiest to forget. What had ever gone wrong, what could ever? The fear creeps in when he's alone - a billowing shadow from the curtains at his window, something moving in the corner of his eye. The terror and pain on Eddie's face as it came for him, his arm dangling from the bone. The ache and fear echoes in Richie again.

"Come on," he says, slinging an arm around Eddie's shoulder. "Would the damsel like me to carry her over the moat?"

"Fuck off," Eddie says, turning around and hopping to the curb to circumvent it.

"As you wish." Richie follows a breath behind.

The Tozier house is like all the others on the street, except brown instead of a cream or faded green. It'd be indistinguishable from every fourth home and Richie himself might not even recognize it if it weren't for the Monty Python poster he plastered to his bedroom window on the side. No one's home when they arrive. His parents are working or book clubbing or date nighting - he can never remember, maybe they forgot to tell him. Richie trudges straight to the laundry room as Eddie hangs up his coat by the door and takes off his shoes, placing them next to the floor vent to dry. He hops over the soggy footprints Richie left behind, sidling up behind him as Richie's submerged halfway into the dryer.

“Alright, how do you feel about...” Richie pulls himself out and proffers a lump of clothes to Eddie. “Shorts and dark side of the moon?”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “Sure. Whatever.” He grabs the clothes and heads to the bathroom off the laundry room. It has a sliding door, the latch slightly broken so it leaves a gap. Richie leans against the washer, watching the sliver of light spilling from the bathroom into the dim room. He’s not a creep, he’s not a peeping tom. He’s seen Eddie in various states of undress over the years. It’s nothing new. Still, he stays and watches the gap. The shift of shadows as Eddie pulls his limbs through the shirt, hears the shuck of his pants peeling off his wet skin. Richie jumps when the door slides open, a lump of wet clothes landing at his feet.

“Alright, clean it up, trash mouth.”

“Sir yes sir!” He pours in half the bottle of detergent and sets the washer to the strongest setting. Eddie’s already back in the living room and Richie trips over himself trying to keep up.

Eddie is standing in front of the thermostat, punching at the buttons, squinting at the tiny screen. His parents had just gotten it installed. They were very proud.

“When’s the last time you guys replaced your air filters?” Eddie reaches for his fanny pack but his hand stops there. Old habits, Richie reasons.

“It’s brand new, Kaspbrak, cool your tits.”

Eddie glares and goes over to the couch. The shorts are too big on him, and he holds onto the waistband to keep them up as he walks. Richie thinks his heart might stop it’s stuttering so bad. He’s never seen Eddie in black before - the rainbow pouring from the prism is the only thing that looks like Eddie in the whole outfit - and it serves to paint his hair and eyes a richer brown. Eddie spreads his legs across the length of the couch, turning on the TV to a sitcom he’s certainly not allowed to watch at home.

Richie snorts. “What, no Masterpiece Theater?”

“Fuck off, Richie - you’re the reason I’m stuck in your fucking house, the least you could do is let me watch whatever I want.” Eddie tugs the oversized shirt down, itching a spot on his shoulder.

“Jesus fuck, man,” Richie says. “What’s got you in such a bad mood?”

Eddie flicks his eyes to him, a nervous movement he tries to hide. “Nothing.”

“Come on, Eds,” Richie goads. “I promise I won’t tell.”

“I’m fucking starving, Richie,” Eddie snaps. “I had like five carrot sticks at 11 AM, I feel like I’m gonna die.”

Richie stands up straight and does a deep bow. “Well well well, monsieur, do not fret.” He knows Eddie’s eyes are rolling even if he can’t see it - Richie’s French accent is one of Eddie’s least favorites. “Welcome et bienvenue to ze Toh-zee-ay dining expérience! Vee ‘ave some excellente options pour vous ce soir.”

Eddie flops his head back on the arm of the couch. “Whatever, just bring it out here.” Crossed arms. Tiny frown. Cute. Cute. Cute.

Richie flicks on the light in the kitchen. The sink is full of dishes that he’s pretty sure he’ll get in shit for later if he doesn’t wash them but what the hell, it’s probably the most face time he’ll get with his parents all week.

Now, if only he knew how to cook.

He opens the cupboards to your standard fare - rices and flours and powders and beans - all things that maybe a 14 year old should technically be able to work with but the lessons got lost somewhere between his dad thinking cooking was for girls and his mom being too enamoured with restaurants and take out to bother.

“Hey, Eds,” Richie calls to the living room. “Is it technically cannibalism if I make you spaghetti?”

“Shut up, Richie, I’m watching this!”

He shuts the cupboard and smiles for a moment before his own

stomach starts to make noises. The refrigerator clicks in an uneven rhythm that reminds him of morse code. He's dreamt of this before. Coming home to an empty house, no food to speak of, static on the TV. His parents have left and forgotten him, their things gone or strewn around like they left in a hurry. Richie hides in his room as the house decays around him, groaning and falling apart until it's no different than Niebolt. Children pass by, shrieking and whispering in giddy fear. He's the monster inside.

"And get me a water while you're at it!" Eddie's voice shouts from the couch.

"Ice?"

"Are you kidding me?"

Richie chuckles. No ice. First he opens the fridge in one last hopeful effort - mostly empty except for condiments and a tupperware near the back with something white and lumpy in it. He fishes it out and opens the lid, sniffs - ah yes, perfect. He grabs a spoon and a tub of cool whip from the fridge drawer and heads back.

"Behold!" Richie says, holding the container behind his back and then ceremoniously placing it on the coffee table. "Ambrosia!"

Eddie looks, and then frowns. "What the fuck is this, Richie?"

"It's ambrosia. Food of the gods, they say."

"Are you kidding? The gods? A dog wouldn't eat this."

Richie shrugs. "Well chow down, pup, because it's the only thing we've got." Richie steps toward the couch and Eddie lifts his legs reflexively, placing them back over Richie's lap when he's sat.

"Where did this even come from?" Eddie asks.

"I think the neighbors brought it over or something. It's been in there a while."

"No way, Richie, no way. It already looks rancid."

Richie picks up the container and waves in front of Eddie's face, flinching back. "Try it, it's not bad." He spoons some into his mouth, *mmm* -ing and gnashing his teeth together with his mouth open.

"That's disgusting," Eddie looks away. "What's that for?" He nods at the cool whip.

"It's extra topping."

Eddie leans over the container, spinning it to read the label. "What's this even made of?"

"Heaven," Richie says.

"There's not even real dairy in this, it's all oil and—and hydro...carbonites and stuff."

"Mmmm, tasty, tasty oil. You know you wanna try it, Eds."

Not-so-sneakily, Eddie spins the container to read the expiration date. The relief on his face when he sees it's not until next January would be comical if it weren't so fucking cute.

"You really think I'm trying to poison you, Eds?"

"I'm not ruling anything out."

Eddie's still watching the screen and Richie is overcome with an aching wish that things were different. Different how - that's where the thought stops. He doesn't have the words or the years to express the way this lonely house scratches him from the inside, leaving splinters he can't ever push out. That having Eddie there, no matter how he bitches, is abject bliss.

"What happened to my water?" Eddie asks.

"Get it yourself, princess."

Eddie huffs and gets up; their skin unsticks from each other's with the movement. Alone now, the laugh track grates in Richie's ears. One roaring laugh among the crowd sounds clownish, absurd. Richie wonders why Pennywise never confronted him like the others. He

remembers the fear in Niebolt like a sore muscle. A missing poster, his rotting body - in hindsight It wasn't as creative as it could've been. Fear of abandonment, what a shocker. That's what he told the Losers, too. But what could have really topped the seizing fear he felt when he heard the door slam, Eddie on the other side? He never told him what he saw, the blood pouring from his mouth. He had his own nightmares to deal with. This one was just for him. Nobody had to know.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Huh?" Richie startles.

"You're freaking me out, sitting there all silent like a psycho." Eddie settles on the couch again, placing his legs exactly where they were before. He cradles his cup of water close to his face - his lips are magnified through the glass.

Richie sneers. "You don't really wanna know what's going on in my twisted mind, do you, Eds?"

Eddie puts up a hand. "You know what, you're right, I don't."

Here's what Richie's thinking about this second: he's thinking of putting his hand on Eddie's knee, slow and careful so he won't flinch away. Touching his thumb to the soft part of Eddie's calf, right at the bend, running it along his skin over and over until they fall asleep. Waking up first to be able to see him at ease for once. What he'd give to be the reason that Eddie feels safe.

Everything's harder now, he thinks. It was easier not to know. Easier when he could miss him like air and not feel guilty for breathing.

Richie packs a spoonful of the ambrosia, places his forefinger on the tip of the spoon, and flicks the contents directly at Eddie's face.

The outrage and scuffle that follows makes Richie laugh until he's dizzy. By the end of it, when the remainder of the container is on Richie's head, Eddie's laughing too, easy and triumphant. Richie tries to think who else wouldn't have stormed out after the first insult, the second bad joke, the third bad impression. Everyone gets tired of his

shit eventually. Who could blame them? Only Eddie ever stays - even if it's out of spite. He's still there, fuming and laughing and there.

Eddie wipes his palm across his cheek, to clean off the cream but really only spreads it farther. Richie could scream.

"I'll give you \$400 if you try it," Richie says. "C'mon. Eddie. \$400. Just do it."

Eddie raises an eyebrow, his foot taps. "\$400?"

"Four hundred fucking dollars, Eds."

There's a chunk of marshmallow and creamy mandarin stuck to the side of the container, and in one move Eddie spoons it out with his finger and puts it in his mouth.

Their expressions are inverses of one another, Richie's mouth expanding into a wide laugh as Eddie's contracts into bitter disgust.

He coughs like he's choking. "Eugh! This is so sweet, it's disgusting. How can you eat this?"

That's what Richie loves. The sweetness that makes his stomach churn. He wants, and for half of a moment, lets himself.

Eddie drains his glass and puts out his palm. "Alright, Richie, where's my money?"

Richie laughs. "You think I have \$400?"

"You asshole!"

"Put me on some kind of payment plan. Like, a nickel a day."

"So I'll get my money after 8,000 days? I don't fucking think so."

"Aw, look at you Eddie, you're so smart! So smart and cute, I could die!" Richie wrestles Eddie's head under his arm, heart battering his ribs as Eddie tries to get away.

"If you don't die," Eddie warns, but from the strained angle Richie

can see that he's smiling. "I'm gonna kill you, Richie."

He didn't doubt it.

They step out onto the road and it's like he can breathe again. Richie's room, even with the shitty little AC unit blasting, was suffocating. He can only imagine how Eddie feels about the recycled air, the grime around the vents that haven't been cleaned in ever - the billions of bacteria they're choking down and how his skin would be itching all over. It was a safe enough bet that he'd be awake, less safe that he'd be willing to go out again at this hour. Eddie opened the door halfway to the second knock.

They don't say much as they walk over. Richie's arms are prickling from the cross breeze, and when he makes a comment about Derry's bullshit weather, Eddie tells him he's turned into a dumb Californian.

Richie huffs. "Pretty sure you're the dumb one for living in the North Pole."

"Do you even own a jacket? Be honest."

"Why would I *need* to own a jacket?"

"So your arms don't fall off when you come back home to fight an evil clown."

Richie smacks his forehead. "Shit, how could I have forgotten?"

Until a few days ago, Richie had forgotten a lot. Most of his childhood and all of its major players. There were fragments, images and smells that he could recall from his youth in Derry but most of it was like a dream or mirage on the horizon. The harder he tried to focus on it the more it slipped away. Mike's call was unexpected not just for its randomness but also for how natural it felt when the memory sloshed back in. *Right, Mike, of course. Yeah, alright, I can be*

there.

Eddie's skin looks sallow under the streetlamps. He walks ahead of Richie, striding with purpose to the diner, guiding them along the paths Richie is certain he's forgotten. But there's the drug store, and wasn't there a gas station there before? Eddie pauses at a street corner, looking to his left, tapping his foot and whispering something under his breath. *No*, his brows furrow. He leads them right and then the diner is there in front of them. He half expects the shrubs by the doors to sprout arms and grab them, like the horrors the others have been talking about, but they don't.

"Careful, Eddie," Richie says as they cross the threshold. "Roach!"

"What?" Eddie startles, his arms flinching in to his chest.

"Gotcha, Eds!"

Jesus, is he twelve? Richie could punch himself, but if he keeps it up Eddie will probably do it for him.

The hostess leads them to a booth in the back corner. Neon lights from the sign outside tints their faces in pink and green - it segments Eddie's face diagonally across his nose. He is so strange and different from Richie's memory, alien and pretty when his lashes flick down to read the menu.

It was the only feeling that came to him when he saw Eddie again for the first time, to Richie's dismay. *So pretty*. They were in the private alcove at Jade of the Orient and he shoved his hand in his pocket, fingers itching to do something - what? - a reaching gesture that would've concluded in humiliation when Eddie recoiled. Seeing the others, his brain whiplashed and swam in spirals which provided a convenient albeit disorienting distraction. The memories returned like a bucket of water over the head. At first, shocking and foreign to his ignorant state, but when repeatedly poured over him to saturation, it was hard to remember what it was to be dry.

Eddie was happy to see him, at least. After an hour and a few drinks, the ease between them returned so quickly it made Richie sweat. Because with the ease came the affection, as natural to him as

laughter. It reminded Richie of old cartoons where the coyote runs off the cliff and is able to keep going until he's aware how far he's gone. Then it's hopeless.

After the first dinner, after driving back separately to their rooms, after panicked laughter in response to Eddie's proposal after they arm-wrestled, Richie was restless, sleepless, and lifeless when left alone. It felt like his whole body was dead and leaden except for a timpani in his chest rattling and forbidding him from peace. A little to do with the supernatural, a little to do with the person on the other side of the wall. The rhythm hasn't stopped - it only lags when Eddie's distracted and rushes again as soon as he speaks.

"Dessert menu?" The waitress asks when she comes by. She's young and pretty, someone that his comic friends back home would sweet talk and borderline harass if they were here. He watches Eddie's eyes when she addresses them, where they land on her. He's looking in her eyes but Richie is waiting for that flick down. The glance at her lips, her chest, her hips. He has a friend who's turned on by ears and always looks like he's slightly cross-eyed when talking to women, looking just to the right of their eyes. Eddie's eyes don't move. He looks back at Richie for confirmation. The silent question there - *you dragged me out here, what do you want to do?*

"Uh, yeah, sure that's fine."

She places the menus between them and flashes Richie a smile, clacking her nails on the tabletop before walking away. Eddie's staring at him, lips pursed like he's about to lose it.

"What?" Richie asks. Eddie shakes his head. "Seriously, what?"

"Is everyone famous in LA?"

"What are you talking about?"

Eddie lowers his head toward Richie. "Because you seem to keep forgetting how fucking weird it is for these people to meet a celebrity."

"I'm not a celebrity."

“Rich, this is Derry. The mattress store guy with the toupe commercials is a celebrity.”

Richie rolls his eyes. “Haven’t you heard?” Then, in an old-timey movie voice, “*The stars are just like us!*”

“No, you’re pretty special,” Eddie says, eyes combing over the items. Richie’s blushing before he has time to shield himself with his menu. “Most celebrities don’t have ‘clown killer’ on their resume.”

“Aw, getting jealous, Eds? Don’t worry, you can add that to your resume soon too.”

“Why would I care, I’m married, remember?”

Richie squints. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Seriously? She was staring at you the whole time. She looked like she wanted to eat you.”

“Gross,” Richie says. Then, “Or like, hot, but also gross. That’s a pretty weird kink.”

Eddie blushes and scowls and Jesus Christ, how isn’t this completely obvious? What exactly was he hoping to get out of this excursion other than completely embarrassing himself in front of his childhood best friend who also happens to be the cutest guy he’s ever seen?

“So, um, do you know what you want?” Eddie asks.

“Probably something sweet... Oh hey, your mom’s on the menu right here! Let’s get that!”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Richie, she’s dead.” His lip starts to curl. “You’re worse than I remember.”

Not even a *beep, beep*. For whatever reason his disappointment calms Richie. This is how he remembers them being. Richie pining, Eddie being too adorable to stand, Richie saying the grossest thing he can imagine to get Eddie to move back because if he gets any closer Richie’s not going to be able to stop himself, Eddie getting mad, Eddie looking cute while mad, repeat. It’s familiar though this time

there's an edge of precariousness to it, like one note too far and it'll turn the page from frustration to hatred.

Eddie pulls out his phone and starts typing something out, glancing back and forth from the menu.

"Who are you texting?" Richie smiles. "An old Derry flame?"

"I'm texting my wife."

Richie snorts. "She's got you on a tight leash."

Focused, this is more important than Richie's jab, "I already went over my dessert allowance for the month, I need to ask her if there's anything here I can still get."

"I'm sorry, what?"

Eddie sends it and sets his phone down, his cheeks pinching. "Look, she controls the finances ok, but—BUT," he puts up a finger as Richie's smile starts to widen. "It's for the best. She's really good with this kind of stuff. She doesn't just factor in the money part, it's this whole equation she has with a health to cost ratio, which she calculates into an allowance so I know how much I can spend that's not doing any damage to my body."

"Oh my god, Spaghetti, do you even hear yourself?"

"Hey, you and I *both* need to be looking out for our heart health, ok? Once you hit forty your risk for heart disease *quadruples*, and if you have a family history of..."

Comedians have one of the highest risks of suicide he'd said over dinner. Richie laughed and made a joke about how they couldn't kill him if they tried, and people *have* tried. Then Bill steered the conversation to near-death experiences, everyone laughing and distracted by shared trauma. How did Eddie even know that? That was another thing he'd forgotten - Eddie's uncanny ability to make Richie feel seen even when everyone else's eyes were closed from laughing.

Eddie's phone dings. He reads it and blows air out of his mouth, lips pulled tight. Almost under his breath, he says, "Guess that's a no."

“Don’t sweat it,” Richie says. “I’ll get the check.”

“I don’t need your fucking charity, Richie.”

“Remember how you were saying I’m such a huge celebrity?” Richie flashes his gold credit card, winking at Eddie.

“Fuck it, whatever,” Eddie says.

Richie thinks of all the people he’s said no to recently that asked him for money. His friends, Eric, Doug, Hayden, Josh, his old manager, his uncle. If Eddie asked him right now for a new car he’d give it to him, no questions asked.

“Besides,” Richie says. “I still owe you \$400, remember?”

“Oh my god, you do,” Eddie says, his eyes narrowing at the memory. “You fucking thief.”

“You’d have your money by now, if you’d put me on that payment plan.”

“Guess that’s one way to keep in touch.”

They chuckle, Eddie’s hands slipping from the tabletop into his lap. Sitting across from him, Richie feels as old as he’s ever been. He is, but so is Eddie.

Eddie hitting Richie with his cast and both of them sore and hurting and laughing after. That laughter echoing out of his chest, rumbling against his ribs so hard his glasses fall off.

Richie remembers his agent asking him two nights before if he’s ok. She’s worried about him, she knows about the show in Charleston. Give me a call back, ok? I need to know what’s going on with you, Rich.

Eddie gets up, says he needs to use the bathroom.

Richie shouts after him, “Text me if you get lost on the way back!”

Eddie flips him off without turning around. The waitress comes and

Richie orders for them both, smirking as the waitress quirks her eyebrow at his choice. She tries to start a conversation about her grandmother's recipe of the same dish and Richie pulls out his phone, opening and closing the calculator app. She takes the hint and leaves.

There's something blooming in his chest as he watches Eddie's empty seat. It's almost fear, but there's something else. *That fucking clown*, Richie thinks. *You just need to find your token and kill the motherfucking clown.*

Richie gets a text: *Where are you? I've lost my way, send help.*

He laughs and then Eddie's there again in the booth. Before he can say a word the waitress is back, slapping the bowls of ambrosia on the table and spinning on her heel.

How quickly Eddie's face moves makes him dizzy. "Jesus fucking christ, Richie, no! I'm not eating that!"

"But remember how much you loved it?" Richie says.

"Remember how I got fucking *dysentery* from your mom's disgusting —"

"First of all, the neighbors made it, not my mom. Second, food poisoning can happen at any time, dude. What, you wanna barge back in the kitchen yourself and inspect the process? Make sure you're nice and safe?"

Eddie tries for withering but his smile's too big. "Don't tempt me. And, AND," he puts his finger up. "That wasn't the only thing bad that happened. Do you remember when we were done washing my pants?"

Richie snorts. "You mean your shorts?"

Eddie kicks him under the table, "And how do you mistake soap for bleach?"

"One of my many talents, thank you, thank you." He uses one of the voices he does in his act but it doesn't register to Eddie.

“God, I got in so much trouble,” he says, running his thumb over the curve of the spoon then pushing it into the ambrosia. “She kept me home sick for like a month. My mom hated you so much.”

“Hated that she loved me.”

Eddie turns his spoon midway to his mouth and flicks it at Richie. The arc of the cream lands in a perfect line across Richie’s face, trailing down his shirt and onto the table. Eddie laughs, *god that fucking laugh*, and Richie retaliates. In thirty seconds half their bowls are all over each other and the booth. The waitress walks by - they freeze as she passes, Richie sliding down in his seat to kick Eddie who kicks back as they stifle laughter. No time has passed, not a minute, not an hour, certainly not 27 years.

He can’t tell him either the ways he’d stayed with Richie in the years apart. Ridiculous as it sounds, at every souvenir shop on every stop of his tour, Richie found himself drawn to the fanny packs with touristy logos on them, oversized dated and neon. Not for himself, but as a gag gift, for someone - only when he tried to think who in the world would want that, there was nothing. And then there were the scripts.

When Richie got to LA he’d joined an acting class, a stand-up class, and a screenwriting class. He figured between the three he’d be able to find his niche and make something of himself. Most of the assignments for the writing class were short films or sketches or spec scripts. There’s a lot of names one needs to come up with for these things, and Eddie was the name that came to him most naturally for pretty much everything. Screenplay about a cyborg? Officer Eddie Kauer on the case. Sketch about a sandwich shop? Location: Eddie’s Subs. Even in improv groups he found himself naming his scene partners “Eddie” more often than not. Someone asked him if it was the name of a sibling once, which was obviously ridiculous. No, he’d say, it’s just a good, solid name. Everyone knows an Eddie, right? Everyone except Richie.

“God, this is so gross,” Eddie says, ripping his spoon out of his mouth. “This does not count as part of the repayment. I want cash.”

“In your dreams, Kaspbrak.”

“What happened to Mr. Moneybags a few minutes ago?”

“Put me on the payment plan.” He nudges Eddie’s foot with his own, arms slung over the back of the seat. “Make sure you stick around this time.”

The color on Eddie’s cheeks. *Cute*. The stubble - that’s new. Who would’ve thought he even could. Eddie idly puts the spoon in his mouth again before he remembers and then rolls his tongue, grimacing.

“Eugh, god. Seriously, Richie, this is the worst dessert ever.” He flags down the waitress. “Excuse me, can we get two waters?”

She hardly looks at him, staring instead at Richie, lips puckered sour. She grabs two glasses from behind the counter and brings them over, knocking them down and filling them hastily. The tail end flourish of filling Richie’s splashes onto his shirt and she turns away without a word.

“Jesus,” Eddie snuffles, smiling. “What’d you do to her?”

Richie shrugs, touches his thumb to his chin and clucks his tongue. “Just gave her a little dose of the Tozier charm.”

“That would do it.”

Half hour ticks by, an hour. The waitress ended her shift and a tall woman of an indeterminate older age takes over. She pours them coffee that only Richie drinks and asks if he’s the guy from the TV.

Eddie says, “Yes, yes he is.” A knowing glance thrown his way.

Richie withholds a groan. “Want an autograph or something?”

She huffs. “You’re not *that* funny.”

Eddie hits his head so hard on the table doubled over laughing Richie thinks he might have a concussion.

He’s calm in a way Richie doesn’t recognize. It unsettles him; he chalks it down to the years apart. There’s a lot he wouldn’t recognize

about Eddie now, and the same goes the other way around. That's how this works. You leave, you grow up, you grow out of people. A few days back home doesn't change that.

Richie pays and it's almost laughable compared to LA prices - *eight fucking dollars for both of us - with tip - and his wife said no?* He knows the woman Eddie's married to, Richie walked him home to that woman almost every day until 1990. It almost sours his mood but Eddie looks so fucking happy, shoulders back instead of hunched, smile big and light and easy. He sees himself reaching across the table in his mind's eye, grabbing Eddie's hand that lies flat on the table, running his fingers over the knuckles and turning over his palm gently.

Richie gets up in one move and says, "Alright, let's blow this popsicle stand, Eds. We've got painful memories to dig up and a supernatural creature to kill, remember?"

Eddie's eyes widen in embarrassment or panic, Richie's not sure. He chokes down the rest of his water as Richie walks out, the bell on the door jingling as he leaves.

Eddie asks him who's the biggest celebrity he's ever met, and Richie tells a story about a time he had drinks with Steve Martin on the rooftop of the W hotel in Hollywood. It's not *untrue*, he just leaves out the part about how it wasn't so much drinks with Steve Martin as drinking at the same bar when he happened to be there, going up to him while drunk and trying to start a conversation, insinuating that they're the same caliber of comedian and Steve Martin telling him he has no idea who he is. He doesn't tell Eddie either about how he went back to his apartment afterward with a splitting headache and took three vicodin he bought off of a friend's friend, chased it with a shot of tequila, and thought he was dead when he woke up, coughing up vomit all over his chest. A show the next day at an half-rate casino where he forgot two of his punchlines. Eddie's eyes are sparkling, completely starstruck, almost proud? He tells a story about Alec Baldwin cutting in front of him in line at Starbucks, how he wanted to pour the creamer over his head he was fuming so bad. Richie's sides hurt he's laughing so hard.

They've circled around the town center and end up at the bridge.

Richie thinks he ought to be a little more careful - It doesn't just strike when you're alone - but there's an odd sensation of safety as they walk through the near dark. Neither of them have seen stars like this in years. Eddie's talking a mile a minute and if it were anyone else, he would've assumed he'd done a bump in the bathroom. They settle against the side of the bridge overlooking the water. Richie doesn't have to look down to know which spot this is.

"This shit's so weird," Eddie says, rubbing a hand over his face. "It's like every time I remember something I *feel* the exact way I felt in that moment. Is that happening to you?"

Richie nods. "Kinda, yeah." Meaning: acutely, intensely, horribly.

Eddie turns to him. "Hey, didn't you try to throw me over this bridge in like 5th grade?"

"Come on, Eds, I wasn't *actually* going to throw you over." Richie nudges his side. "What kind of stepdad would I be if I did that?"

"Beep beep, Rich." Eddie covers his palm with his jacket sleeve and brushes off the bit of wood he leans against. "You know I thought you hated me when I first met you?"

"Seriously?"

"Just for like, I don't know, a week or something. Fifth grade? You kept making fun of me—"

"I wasn't making fun—"

"Shut the fuck up, yeah you were. You were *teasing* me, like, endlessly, I felt like I was going to have a panic attack. And then somehow we ended up walking alone together after the rest went home. And you just kept fucking picking on me and finally I turned to you and said—"

"Up yours, shithead." Richie laughs. "I remember that! Jesus, that was hilarious."

Richie remembers the anxiety when Eddie started hanging out with them, the certainty that Eddie would replace him. The desperation,

please please please don't take my friends, please . Lashing out in hopes that Eddie would feel too antagonized to keep coming back, which only made his friends cringe and pull away even more. And then the moment Eddie fought back, and the curious happiness that rushed through him. The warmth, excitement, even. He never thought he'd be so glad to meet his match.

"I was so confused when you started laughing," Eddie says.

"Look, man, I was just waiting for you to step up and earn your respect from the alpha."

"The *alpha* ?" Eddie blinks at him, lashes fluttering. "Is that supposed to be you?"

Richie shrugs. "I'm the tallest."

"Not anymore."

"Oh come on, Ben's not *that* tall."

"I was talking about Mike."

"Ah shit, you're right." He punches Eddie's shoulder, soft, attuned to his knuckles and the gentle press against him. "Still taller than you."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, stop acting like it's a big fucking accomplishment."

"So you admit that you're short!"

"Fuck you, dickwad."

Quiet want creeping up the back of Richie's neck. How does he feel about Eddie? Haunted. He had forgotten the melody of his longing and now it's ringing in his ears, a herald of the ache that follows. What would have happened if he had remembered Eddie all these years? What choices would he have made? What lives could he have lived, and were there any where he didn't love him? Was there a life where he had the nerve to tell him, the luck to hear it back?

This is where he's supposed to retaliate, call him cute or make a joke

designed specifically to make Eddie uncomfortable. Instead his throat is pinching into itself, eking out repulsive sincerity.

“Just uh, for the record, I never hated you. You were like my best friend.”

“Same here.”

They share a small smile and Richie thinks he'll be sick.

“Hey, Richie?” Eddie's eyes are on the water, arms crossed, fists balling into his sleeves.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think we would've stayed friends? Like, if we'd actually remembered this place. Do you think... I don't know. We probably would've gone to different colleges, but...” A sideways glance so fast and nervous it shocks him like a cut.

The grief in this longing. It has always, always been there. Being in Derry, with It, staying, is the closest Richie's come to realizing his passive death wish. It's the most alive he's felt in years. And in that time away, asleep and unknowing, he'd forgotten how terrible it is to breathe and want and *want*.

Nothing's different.

“I think I would've given you some serious daddy issues, if we were friends *and* you were my stepson.”

Eddie lowers his head and sighs.

Richie tests out laughter but Eddie's face stays blank. “What?” Richie asks. “C'mon, what?”

“Nothing, Richie. Forget it.”

“Christ, Eds, what do you want me to say?”

“Yeah, I get it. My fucking mistake for trying to be serious.”

Richie's watching him, the ticks and jitters, the way he bites his lip before taking a puff off his inhaler. The temperature is dropping, Eddie's cheeks are turning pink as his frown deepens.

"Hey," Richie says. "Are you like, ok?"

"No." Eddie laughs, hollow, and he looks down the bridge. "Have I ever been?"

Richie's entire being screams. Tell him. Tell him.

Tell him about how you've been wanting to end it, or tell him that right now all you want is to exist right here for eternity - to loop back and loop back to him landing less than a foot away from you on this bridge - an inscription you made 27 years ago brushing against his hip.

"For someone who never stops talking it's pretty fucking creepy when you do," Eddie says.

Richie huffs. "Don't get used to it."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Do you really wanna know what goes on in here, Eds?"

There's almost a smile. "Try me, trash mouth."

Richie thinks Eddie would be shocked to know the plaintive, depressive thoughts that go on in his head. Or maybe that's a kindness - maybe Eddie wouldn't be surprised at all. In Charleston it had taken less than ten minutes before he was walking off the stage, mid-routine, certain he was going to pass out. Who would care? Would anyone in that audience even blink or would they just laugh - *it's all part of the act* .

Richie pivots. "You like being married?"

Eddie huffs a laugh. "Does a felon like prison?" A pause, then, "Jesus, I can't believe I just said that."

Richie's laugh feels like water through his chest. "What are you in

for?”

Eddie sighs out slow. His following chuckle is weighted, opaque - Richie waits for him to say whatever he's holding in. *Marriage is difficult, I love her but* — He looks at the water like there's something to find. After another moment Richie can tell he's this close to working himself up to say something - and then terror takes him at what he might say.

“I hate this fucking bridge,” Richie says.

Eddie snorts. “Why?”

“It's depressing as fuck.” Richie glances over as Eddie grunts in laughter. It feels like he's on stage again. “Like I know we were ‘the losers’ but there's nothing like the ghosts of strangers professing their love and then playing tonsil hockey to really drive it home.”

Eddie shifts his weight. “You never took anyone here?”

“Wow, yeah, you really don't remember me, do you?”

Eddie's voice is small when he asks, “Who would you have taken? Like if you could pick anybody.”

“Your m—”

“Oookay, I really set myself up for that one, huh?”

Richie grins, smarmy as he leans toward him. “Guess I could take you up on your offer from the other night, right? Shirts off? Make up for lost time. Bowers would be turning over in his straight jacket knowing he was right about me.”

“He was?”

Richie calculates within the following seconds, half-seconds, milliseconds, how easy it would be. Just nod, just say yes. What do you think he's going to do, Richie thinks. Hate you? Be an asshole? *Laugh*, a voice says inside him. *He'll laugh*. It could never be that simple.

“He was right about me,” Eddie says in the silence.

“Wait, what?”

Eddie nods to himself, biting on his lip. “I am a pussy. I’m a cowardly piece of shit.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Eddie won’t look at him as he says, “I’m not staying. I’m leaving tonight.”

Panic falls on him like an avalanche.

“Eds, you can’t.”

“I can. I am.”

“Seriously, man? Why now? We’re this close to finishing it once and for all.”

“How exactly is that going to happen, Richie? Hm? I haven’t been assaulted by a leper or zombie yet, by some fucking miracle, so I’m not going to stick around and wait for it.” His fire is doused as quick as it raged. “I’m—I’m just not cut out for this, Rich, ok? We all know it. Let’s stop kidding ourselves.”

Richie can hear the earnestness, how fully Eddie believes what he’s saying. Something roils in him, barbed and acidic.

Richie clenches his eyes shut. “Will you shut the fuck up for a second?”

Eddie seems to have expected this. “Why? It’s true. I’m a weak, spineless coward. I’ve been this way my whole life.”

Richie turns to him. “But you’re fucking not. You’re like, the bravest guy I know, you always were. We were little kids when this started. And, yeah you were scared of gray water but you went out there with us even though you knew you’d get hell at home.”

“So did all of you.”

Richie doesn't mean to laugh, sees the startled look on Eddie's face when he does. "I didn't. My parents didn't give a shit what I did, they never cared about me."

Eddie softens, contrite. "Rich, I'm sorry—"

"Look, that's not, whatever. That doesn't matter. I'm just saying. You were living in your own personal hell every single day. At home with *her*, and then living in this—this fucking disgusting world. But you're still doing it. You're afraid something's going to kill you every second but you're still out here. So, so—as far as you're concerned you face death every day. How's this any different?"

He makes a strangled sound in his voice, disbelief. "That's—it's not like that, I'm not—"

"You're brave, Kaspbrak, alright?"

Richie can't stop himself from looking at him, too tired and scared and desperate not to meet his gaze. *What does it matter what he thinks, he won't remember if he leaves.*

"You really think that?"

Richie would take on the clown with his bare fists to hear that hope in Eddie's voice again.

"Hell yeah," he says. "Always did. Remember all those times I told you your pills and inhaler were bull shit?"

Eddie huffs. "Yeah."

"Well I was right, wasn't I?"

"How'd you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"How—how did you know I wasn't sick? Everyone knows I'm a hypochondriac but people believed I had asthma. Like, even if I wasn't *sick* sick, most people figured if I did catch something I'd be too weak to fight off."

Richie rolls his eyes. "That's such bull shit."

"It's really not. People still think that. I still...kinda think that."

"Well they're full of shit. So are you."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm serious," Richie says. "I couldn't do what you do. Fuck, man, I do everything humanly possible to avoid my fears."

"So what are you afraid of, huh? Is Pennywise gonna ambush you as my mom in lingerie?"

"Woah! Nice self-burn, Eds!" He holds up his hand for Eddie to high-five who rolls his eyes with a smile.

"No seriously, do you know how It might come to you?"

"Uhhhh, maybe like, as my manager calling me to say my tour is canceled because I fucked off to fight an immortal killer clown?"

Eddie chuckles and elbows him. "Shut the fuck up. It's not fair, you already know mine."

Richie's biggest fear is standing right next to him. It's asking him kindly about his life, telling him he's sorry. There's a thought in Richie's mind that this has been Pennywise the whole time, waiting for him to spill his guts only to laugh in his face. But Richie is still here.

Richie waits for the blade in his throat to dull, but he speaks through it to say, "Do you really want to leave?"

"I don't know," Eddie says, sniffing. "Everything in my body is screaming at me to get the hell out of here."

Richie smirks. "Me too."

"Then why are you staying?"

Richie is amazed that Eddie can look at him, still. He wants to face

him but his courage is fickle, one quirked eyebrow or look of surprise and he'll lose his nerve. Eddie doesn't move or flinch when Richie puts his hand over his on the wooden rail. He's still when Richie turns his hand over, running his fingers over his palm. His skin is clammy and soft; Richie remembers fleeting, fluttering moments when he could sneak a touch to point something out on TV, to pull him back from a nightmare. They look out at the water. It's a deep, textured black. He waits for the laugh, but it doesn't come.

Eddie's exhale is shaky, Richie is almost tempted to look. He hears beside him, "Are you scared right now, Rich?"

The laugh is his own. "I'm fucking terrified. Jesus, I'm shaking like a fucking chihuahua."

Eddie squeezes his hand. The words spill.

Richie says, "Fucking fuck, I've thought about this moment like a trillion times and now I don't even know what the fuck to—"

Eddie's hands are pulling on his shirt and it's quick enough he doesn't have time to be afraid. Eddie kisses him, going in so fast their faces bump almost painfully. It's not what Richie thought it would feel like, when he allowed himself the indulgence to imagine it. He thought at least one of them would be confident. That he'd have said something smooth, leaning over Eddie with his back against a wall, tipping up his chin with his thumb. Or maybe Eddie pinning him to the ground after wrestling and moving in, Richie melting into the grass. Instead he can feel Eddie shaking, off-rhythm to the tremors in himself, his smell, his skin that's both softer and tougher than he expected, his warmth - all this he could not have imagined. They break and Richie tries again, slotting his lips more carefully between Eddie's, the smallest movement of his thumb brushing over his hand.

They exhale in tandem when they pull apart, both longer and shorter than Richie expected. Only now he dares to look at Eddie's face. By some miracle, he's smiling as soft as water.

Richie dips his head. It's almost too much to bear so he laughs, "How are you not freaking out right now?"

"I don't know, it's like." He's fighting off a bigger expression, biting his lips together. "It's less scary if you're scared too."

"Good, I guess?"

They face the water, standing closer now, arms pressed side by side.

Richie works himself up to it, convincing himself the answer doesn't matter when he asks, "Did you know?"

"No. Kind of, I don't know. It's hard to believe, ya know?"

Richie shakes his head. "I'm still 85% sure I'm dreaming right now, or you're going to turn into the clown and start beating me to death."

Eddie laughs as Richie pauses. This is the question he hasn't wanted to ask, unsure if he wants to open the door to doubt.

"Um," Richie starts. "Did you, uh, you know—did you know about yourself?"

Eddie bites his cheek. Already Richie is regretting it. Eddie sighs. "I remembered. Being here—everything just sort of hit me over the head."

They squeeze each other's hands at the same time, then share a look and laugh. He can't seem to stop.

Eddie's other hand moves nonstop, drumming his fingers against the rail. "You think we can kill this thing?"

Beverly's visions. Either way there's the threat of death. If they leave right now, there's the chance they'll be an hour on the road and Richie will turn and wonder who the fuck is sitting in his passenger seat.

Richie sighs. "I don't know." He swallows down fear. "I think we should try."

"Ok."

Richie turns. "Ok?"

“Don’t make me change my mind, asshole.”

Richie lifts his hands up in surrender. Eddie grabs his hand back, tucking his arm close to his side.

Eddie bows his head, sniffing again. “I’m really fucking afraid right now, Richie.”

“Me too. Does that help?”

“Maybe not in this situation.”

Richie nods. “Good to know.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Me either,” Richie says, trying for soft. “Like, *especially* not now.” He lifts their hands. “Pretty sure that would be a hate crime.”

Eddie huffs a breathy laugh, foot tapping now, his other hand reaching for his pocket. “Um,” he says, his voice hitching before he clears his throat. “Do you want to go back to my room?”

“Easy, Kaspbrak, I’m not that kind of girl.”

“Fuck off, Richie. I’m freezing out here and I’m kinda too scared to be alone back there.”

Richie smirks and leans his shoulder into Eddie’s. “Don’t worry, I think I can take your mind off it.”

Eddie turns, face pinched and annoyed and *so fucking cute*. “How are *you* not freaking out anymore?”

“Humor’s my defense mechanism, dipshit. I thought you were smart.”

“I thought you were funny.”

A part of them entertains holding hands on the walk back, but it’s still Derry. Pennywise or no, there’s always something to fear. Ben and Beverly are in the parlor talking, soft laughter and the clink of a glass. Bill’s door is shut, his voice speaking quietly to someone on the

phone - his wife, Richie thinks, based on the apologetic tone. Richie closes his own door as they walk past it because he doesn't need the questions from anyone else before he's even figured it out himself. Eddie pulls on his arm as he lets go of the doorknob, a quiet *Richie* as he beckons him inside.

The bed is probably as old as Derry they joke, heinously loud squeaking as their body weight depresses the springs. Richie's feet dangle off the edge of the bed and there's hardly room for them to lie side by side. Eddie grabs his hand but Richie kisses him first, then the second and third time too. They giggle and shush each other as Eddie gets off the bed, goes to the bathroom to change out of his clothes. Richie borrows some of Eddie's pajamas and they nearly blow their cover when Eddie comes out of the bathroom to see him in the illest fitting sweatpants in history.

Richie doubts his own falling asleep, because how can you fall asleep in a dream? His fingers settle in the crook of Eddie's elbow, thumbing the softness there. He stays awake long enough to see Eddie's eyes bat closed, hear his hushed *night Richie* against his collarbone. When he wakes, their bodies unmoved throughout the course of the night, Richie is still afraid, pulse pounding in his neck. But he's still here.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

I promise it's a fix-it... The only way out is through

Richie falls asleep again - it was 5:30 AM when he craned his neck to look at the bedside clock - and wakes for the second time alone. His first thought is, *of course* , until the sound of a shower filtered through the bathroom door makes it through the fog of sleep. Eddie's pajamas are folded neatly at the end of the bed. Richie glances at the empty suitcases in the corner, clothes hanging in the dresser beside it. *Who the fuck unpacks*, Richie thinks, and then he remembers. *Right. Eddie.*

It's almost an hour before Eddie comes out of the bathroom and Richie's halfway to leaving the room to go find a bush to piss in. They stare at each other - Eddie in the doorway, hand still poised on the knob, wet hair combed down and wearing a new variation on the jeans-polo-jacket look, Richie in the middle of the room in too-tight sweats and a five o'clock shadow that's growing out to noon. Richie, who realizes only as he speaks that he hasn't said or drank anything for at least 10 hours, croaks out a garbled phrase that is barely recognizable as "I gotta take a leak."

Eddie moves aside and lets Richie rush past him. Richie unzips and gets strangely self-conscious that Eddie can hear him pissing, before reminding himself that they used to have loogie competitions, and this couldn't be any grosser than that. *He already thinks you're gross*, a thought comes to him. *You're the trash mouth, remember? How many times in your life has he called you disgusting?* It's too many to count, even if he could remember them all.

He comes out of the bathroom to find Eddie faced away at the little desk in the room, counting out pills into a weekly organizer. There are at least seven bottles on the table and two boxes of something. He sidles up behind him and gets close enough to hear Eddie whispering to himself.

"What's all that for?" Richie asks.

Eddie doesn't turn, just shushes him as he drops single pills into each sector one at a time. "Shh—I'm counting."

Richie waits until he's dropped in the last of the pills and closes each day shut with a soft click. Eddie turns around and leans against the table, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What were you saying?" he asks.

"What's with the pharmacy? You got something terminal I should know about?"

Eddie sighs. "Do you actually want to know or are you just going to make fun of me?"

Richie snorts. He was, admittedly, probably going to make a joke, but still there's a twinge of anxiety in his gut at the response. He's taken it for granted that Eddie would still feel the same in the morning.

"Sorry," Richie says. His reflex is to make another joke so instead he asks, "Did you sleep ok?"

Eddie seems just as surprised at the subject change. "Uh, yeah. I actually took an Ambien so it knocked me right out."

"What the fuck, Kaspbrak, are you holding out on me?"

"Fuck off, they're prescription."

"Yeah, and I think a doctor would agree that I could use some prescription strength help sleeping through this nightmare."

Eddie rolls his eyes but there's a smile there that he's literally biting down.

"C'mon, Dr. K," Richie says, stepping closer. "Think you could do me a favor?"

There's a knock on the door and they jump apart like teenagers. It's Bill's voice that calls from the other side.

"Eddie? Are you awake yet?"

“Yeah!” Eddie calls back, only a half second glance at Richie.

“Can I come in for a sec?”

“Um.” Eddie turns to Richie and their wide-eyed gazes match each other perfectly, illuminating nothing for how Eddie might want Richie to respond. So in his panic, Richie grabs his clothes from the day before left in a pile at the foot of the bed and closes himself in the bathroom.

He hears Eddie say *just a sec* before opening the door. Him and Bill talk about meeting downstairs to make a game plan for the day, Bill mentions making a call to Mike. Richie’s still working on getting his heart to a normal resting rate. *That would’ve looked bad*, he thinks, then, *Bad? Would it be bad?* Eddie’s face had been nothing short of panicked a moment ago. Richie compares this with the easy smile on his face the night before, blurry and too close to see clearly. He felt the soft laughter against his chest when he ran his thumb over Eddie’s lips. When had he taken the Ambien? Was he sleepy and drugged the whole time?

Richie waits to hear Bill leave and his footsteps retreating down the hallway, asking Eddie if he’d seen Richie and Eddie’s demure response in the negative. He can hear Bill knocking for him just next door, and then his phone lights up with a call. Richie picks up and almost drops his phone fumbling at the buttons.

“Richie?” Bill asks, he sounds panicked. “Are you ok? I’ve been knocking at your door since like—”

“I’m shitting, give me a minute,” he says then hangs up. Smooth. He runs a dry razor over his face, too distracted to notice the shower of his beard hair coating the sink like pepper. He isn’t cruel enough to use Eddie’s toothbrush so he puts some toothpaste on his finger tip and swishes with water until he’s confident enough that his breath isn’t lethal. It still feels stupid to hope he’ll get close enough to Eddie for it to matter. He hopes wildly anyway.

He opens the door ready to clarify that he wasn’t actually shitting, only to find the room empty. The door is ajar and the voices of the Losers, including Mike, travel up from the dining room below.

There are six chairs around two round tables shoved side by side. Most of the seats are occupied while a few of the Losers get up and move around for the McDonald's coffee carafe someone picked up and the packs of breakfast macs and hashbrown patties littered across the table. Eddie's sandwiched between Bev and Ben, taking delicate bites out of a breakfast burrito.

"Hey, there's sleeping beauty," Bev says, smiling at him with her mouth full. They greet him with hums and nods - Eddie looks up and Richie can seem him losing his appetite.

"Everything c-c-c-come out ok?" Bill asks, pulling down his own childish smile as he takes a seat beside Bev.

She elbows him as she swallows. Mike puts down his sandwich and regards it then Richie with a slight grimace.

"You should stick to writing books, not jokes," Richie says as he sits.

"You're one to talk," Eddie says, and the look on his face is somewhere between petrified and hateful. Richie swallows down a gulp of coffee and nearly chokes.

"Nice one!" Ben holds his hand up for Eddie to slap but Eddie reaches past him for napkins and dabs at his mouth, almost ashamed.

"Alright," Bill says, putting on the same leader voice he did as a kid. When Richie hears that voice he still feels like he'd follow him anywhere. "So, the g-g-game plan for today is for the rest of you to find your tokens. That means Richie, Eddie, and B-Ben, you guys are on your own today, ok?"

The three of them nod. Richie doesn't look at Eddie because at this point he's too afraid to see whether Eddie is disappointed or relieved.

"Bev and I are going to be with Mike at the l-l-library reading up on..."

Richie looks at Bill and only Bill as he talks, and makes sure as soon as he's finished to engage himself in the conversation with the group as thoroughly as possible. Talking over people, making jokes for

everyone to groan at, poking fun at anyone for anything as long as it doesn't leave room for him to think about anything outside of the next words coming out of his mouth. Eventually Bill rallies everyone together when they're finished eating, shoving Ben Eddie and Richie out of the door as the rest walk over to the library.

Now would be the perfect time for Ben to walk away and leave Richie and Eddie to figure out exactly where they stand, but like Eddie had said, there's safety in numbers. The three walk into the center of town, scoping out places that could be of any significance where they might experience one of these waking nightmares the others had described. Richie's less than thrilled, as is to be expected, and his anxiety channels itself into running his mouth, yet again, for Ben to laugh at and egg on. Eddie hardly pays attention, eyes darting off every stray balloon or shriek that could be a scream. The Canal Days festival is in full swing, reminding Richie precisely why he's always hated this rotten apple pie town. Eddie's silence is ominous at best, but nothing Richie says can goad him into conversation. Eddie stops in his tracks as they pass the drug store, the Keen's pharmacy sign pulling him in like a magnet.

"I think I'm gonna stop in here," he says without looking at them.

Ben nods, hands in his pocket. "Be safe," he says.

Richie feels his throat tightening, a fear gripping at his gut that this moment is important. He should say something important - just in case.

"Good luck in there, kiddo," he says instead.

Eddie grimaces and turns to him. "Kiddo?"

"Yeah, that's something a stepdad would say, right?"

"Yeah, fuck you too," Eddie says, patting Richie's arm lightly as he walks toward the pharmacy. He opens the door and doesn't look back.

Richie's nauseous and despite all sense he wants more than anything to be completely alone. The old arcade isn't far off and he ditches Ben

with a half-hearted farewell. *Bring it on* , Richie thinks. How much worse could it possibly get?

Everything happens very quickly after that.

In retrospect, Pennywise's torture is fairly uncreative, Richie thinks. Taunts about his "secret" and how the exposure would ruin him, professionally and personally. He gets a phone call from his manager once he's run over to the park where she tells him his tour is canceled, and that their professional relationship is canceled too. He was always just a dollar sign to her anyway, and now that the secret's out he's not worth anything, to anyone. When he hangs up he sees a text from Eddie, telling him in no polite terms that the night before had been a huge fucking mistake. A man with a gash for his face hands Richie his own funeral card. When he looks up, the clown is there on top of the Paul Bunyan statue, laughing as the world colors itself frightening. He runs back to the Town House, locks himself in his room and checks his phone again. The last message from Eddie had been the one from the night before - *Where are you? I've lost my way, send help*. He had thought about leaving them behind - what's really stopping him from taking a stab at surviving in the real world? But the thought that Eddie could be hurt or worse without him makes him head back downstairs to join Bev, Bill and Ben. Richie's feelings for Eddie are just a footnote in the grand scheme of things. There's a fine line between selfless and self-punishing that Richie's never been great at differentiating.

He isn't there when Eddie gets stabbed. He's off chasing Bill who took Pennywise's bait and made a run for the carnival. In fact it's not until it's long dark and he's officially taken someone's life that he and Eddie have any semblance of time alone. He'd be more nervous if he weren't about to die. When Eddie doesn't even try to save him, he isn't surprised.

Things blur. A hand on Eddie's shoulder as they creep through the sewers, a pep talk he fumbles through - trying and failing to reel in his emotions, pulling on his arm to squeeze through a tight crevice hundreds of feet under the earth. The ritual, the failure, the fear, everywhere, more helpless than he's ever been, running through the

endless maze of channels and crevices until they're facing three doors he's seen before. Richie grabs Eddie by the wrist - taking his hand feels forbidden still, no excuse for forgotten decorum. And really, truly, Richie knows he makes bad jokes for a living, but Pennywise's little closet on the other side of the last door is in poor taste it's so cheesy. He doesn't have time to gripe about it to Eddie because he's saving Mike's life again. There's a part of him that knows he's asking for trouble, hurling insults can only buy them time, but still, he has the barest thought of surprise when his eyes connect with the gaping maw and the world is wiped white.

His legs are sore from riding his bike for three hours straight. Richie stands in a sun drenched field, looking at a line of trees ahead of him. His friends are there but he's talking to no one in particular, shading his eyes from the sun when hands connect with his shoulder blades and gravity gets the better of him. His chin is itch-burning from where it's collided with the dirt and he hears snorts and laughter behind him. He rolls onto his back and adjusts his glasses, spitting dust from his lips. Twigs and pebbles are sticking to his sweat-slicked skin and the entire world is warmer than he's felt his whole life.

The figure looming over him is using his hand to cover the shit-eating grin on his face. Eddie's forelock has fallen down and stuck to his forehead, little beads of sweat dotting his hairline as he blots out the sun.

"You ok, Rich?" he asks.

Richie groans and pushes up onto his elbows.

"Yeah, just peachy, Eds, thanks for asking."

"I didn't think you'd fall over."

"Didn't you hear I failed Weeble-ology last year?"

Eddie rolls his eyes and reaches down for Richie's hand.

His skin is hot in Richie's palm and a tremor ripples from the center of Richie's chest deep into his stomach. Bright joy immediately followed by wide, thin fear. It blankets everything, quiet and threatening as they stand closer than necessary, Richie's hand cramped and frozen with Eddie's draped around it. Eddie's eyes are huge and awful, it twists inside Richie so it's too hard to look at him. A hint of confusion on Eddie's face, *what?* he asks without words. Richie drops his hand and remembers to breathe, to laugh, to shove him away and follow it up with a taunt about his mom. How weird would it be to hop on his bike and race away from all of them until he's too tired to move?

Think about it later , he tells himself. It's spring break 1989 which means they have free range to bike and swim and fuck around until sunset. Eddie and Richie had already agreed to sleep over at Bill's since Stan is on vacation in Guam with his family. There are promises of popcorn and candy and an all-night horror movie marathon since Bill's parents don't really care what he does as long as he doesn't bother them about it. Richie knows that game. Knows how great it is until it isn't, how lonely he still feels even when he has the whole room laughing. Eddie's already told them their teeth are going to rot. *That's the point*, Richie had said. *Why get braces when you can go straight for dentures?*

The day boils them slowly so by evening they're overheated and exhausted with just enough energy to put on a movie, leaned against the couch in Bill's den. Richie pours himself a bowl of soda - yes, a bowl, two ice trays full of cubes and fizzing caramel liquid that Eddie pretends to gag at when Richie takes a sip.

"C'mon, try some," Richie says, extending the bowl toward Eddie's mouth. He jerks away.

"That's fucking gross, Richie. You're gonna be up all night," he says.

"Exactly," Richie grins. He says nothing about how he'd be up anyway, even without the soda, a hum of something urgent and terrible and addictive running like a current through his veins. It burns louder the closer he gets to Eddie, like hitting a tuning fork

inside his chest.

The soda does its job, caffeinating Richie so for every line of dialogue he has a zinger of his own to accompany it. Bill and Eddie are doubled over, begging him to shut the fuck up so they don't piss themselves. Richie's nearly forgotten the fear, the mild foreboding that there's something that he ought to be remembering, or remembering to forget. Bill's mother sticks her head in long enough to tell them she's going to sleep and they'd be wise to do the same. It's not a command, merely a suggestion, a platitude for something that's not really her business. Bill nods and says ok, turning the volume on the TV down a notch. There's a girl getting murdered on the screen and Eddie looks like he's sure he's next, knuckles pressed against his mouth and his brow knitted tight. The light from the screen plays shadows and colors on his face and Richie thinks he could watch the whole movie like this reflected in the wide mirror of Eddie's eyes.

"What, dickface?" Eddie asks, snapping Richie to attention.

"You look like you're going to shit yourself," Richie says, to which Bill laughs and reminds them both that he has a baseball bat in the hall closet. This launches Richie into a spiel about how little league is just an excuse for guys who like to wear tight pants and handle "balls" all day.

"Shut up, Richie, you're so gross," Eddie says.

"Hey, you're no better," Richie starts. "Didn't you want to run track? Look at these fucking shorts!" He flicks Eddie's thigh and watches the skin turn pink as Eddie bats his hand away.

"Fuck off," Bill and Eddie say in unison.

"Don't be jealous just 'cause you're too s-s-s-slow to play sports."

"I don't need sports," Richie says. "I've got plenty of game on my own."

More groans and laughter until the movie is over and Bill gets up to change into his PJs. Richie and Eddie slink off to separate bathrooms

to change into borrowed clothes for the night.

He doesn't often look at himself in the mirror, but Richie takes the moment alone to examine himself in the yellowed light. His shirt is off and the skin of his torso looks pale blue compared to the tan on his arms. *Just 'cause you're too slow.* 'Weak' would've been a better way of putting it. His chest makes shadows where his sternum creases inward. He can see each one of his ribs separate and sloping in long lines toward his middle. No matter how much he eats he looks like this. *Every time I look at you you've grown another inch*, his father had said to him. Richie isn't surprised considering how seldom that is. His eyes are magnified behind his glasses, like a cartoon with distorted proportions. His lips are cracking and there's a raw spot in the corner of his mouth he keeps worrying with his tongue. The sweat had dried in his hair crimping it wildly, and he wets the back of it and combs his fingers through in an unsuccessful attempt at taming it. At some point he realizes he's frowning. Trickle of shame and anger drip down his throat. Does Eddie laugh at him when he sees him like this, does Bill? They're his friends, sure, but they have eyes. Anyone can see the failures of his body, know with certainty how little he's capable of just by looking. Richie takes off his glasses to brush his teeth, fumbling back through the hall with them clutched in his palm.

Bill is splayed out across the couch and there are two sleeping bags laid in front of it. Eddie's tucked inside one, sitting up and fussing with his pillow like it's personally offending him.

"Jeez, what took you so long?" Eddie asks when he catches sight of Richie in the doorway.

"It's r-r-rude to jerk off in someone else's bathroom," Bill says halfway through a yawn.

"I had to christen the place," Richie says as he flops down onto the sleeping bag beside Eddie. He smiles through the groans. "I can't help it if I've got blue balls spending a night away from your Mom," he nudges Eddie with his foot.

Bill laughs, earning him a betrayed look from Eddie. Richie thinks it's betrayed anyway, he can hardly see anything through the dim and

lens-less blur. Bill and Eddie start talking about a project they have that's due when they get back from break, how they'll spend the next day working on it together. Richie asks if he can stay too and he's denied, told he'll be too much of a distraction.

"Guess I'm just too fucking funny, huh" Richie says. "It's a gift and a curse." He ignores the keen ache in his chest, swallows down the lump of dread at the thought of slinking back to his empty house alone.

Eddie starts up on how the ending of the movie could've been more realistic, seeing as someone with a stab wound like that would bleed out much more quickly and definitely wouldn't be able to pop back up again in the third act for a revenge stabbing. Midway through the rant Bill starts snoring and they snicker together at the slow whine on the exhale.

"God I wish I had a video camera," Richie says to Eddie in the near-dark.

After a beat, Eddie says, "What are you looking at? My face is up here, dumb ass."

Richie tilts his head in the direction of the voice. "Oh. Right."

"Are you seriously that blind?"

"I don't need eyes," he says. "All your mom cares about is my talented mouth."

"Over here, Richie."

Eddie waves his hand beside his face and Richie scoots up and closer, laughing off the embarrassment.

"I was just testing you," he says. "You passed."

"Am I still blurry?"

"Uh, well, yeah," he says. There's at least two feet of space between them.

“How close until you can actually see me?”

The hum rings in his ears, prickling up his neck as he moves in closer.

“There?” Eddie asks.

“Uh, not really still.” He pushes in a few more inches.

“Now?”

“Like...” He moves until only the width of his hand can fit between them. “Here.”

Eddie laughs. “Jesus christ, that’s sad.”

Richie doesn’t think he’s ever been this close to him. His blood is pumping thick and warm, settling like syrup through each and every capillary. *What is it* , he thinks. The edge of fear is curving around just outside his vision, sharp and fizzing. Eddie’s lashes brush his cheeks as his eyes blink open then closed, over and over a little slower each time.

“Not as sad as your mom when I’m gone,” Richie says. Everything is too still, time passing too fast.

“I’m going to sleep now, Richie.”

“Want a kiss goodnight?”

Oh. *Oh*. He had wondered, and now he knew. A cog clicking into place, bells chiming in his head in warning. *Fuck*, he thinks. He wants to take it back. Restart the whole day and stay home so he doesn’t have to be here and feel like the floor is falling out underneath him.

“ *Good night* , Richie.” Eddie huffs and turns over to face the wall.

Richie’s breath is blocked by his heart sitting plump in his throat, beating and forcing heat on his cheeks like a branding iron. He remembers Bill talking about what kissing Beverly Marsh felt like, his whole body burning up and his mind going blank. He’d never said he was in love with her, but they all saw the moony way he tracked her

with his eyes as she passed in the halls, vacant smile like a dunce whenever she spoke in class. He said it made him feel dizzy. The heat was there, but Richie's mind wasn't blank. Vertigo gripped him like a vice turning his stomach sideways, gripping at the scratchy fabric of the sleeping bag as two thoughts scrambled to the forefront of his mind, one knocking the other off and back again: the first, *please please please*, and the second, *god not this, please god don't make me want this*.

Darkness then light then darkness then light. It flickers fuzzy in his vision, the ground beneath him focusing into hard jagged rock. Shooting pain travels up his knees and through his back, blooming into something sharp and excruciating at the base of his skull. Control of his limbs comes back aching slowly like moving through molasses. Minutes or seconds later - Richie can't tell, time feels strange in this state - Eddie hovers over him with a joyful face lit up among the darkness.

"Rich! Rich wake up! Hey—"

He's talking so fast, his hands don't feel real when they touch Richie's shoulder then face.

"Yeah, yeah there he is, buddy! Hey, Richie, listen, I think I got it man! I think I killed it!"

It? Killed what? Richie swallows and tries to speak but his throat is dried to sandpaper - something sour runs from his nasal cavity down the back of his throat.

"I did! I think I killed it for real—"

The spray lands so gently on Richie's face, he has to blink over and over to connect the softness of the feeling with the horror of what he sees. He cannot move. His brain stop-starts a hundred times in the space of a second but as he watches Eddie lift from the ground he cannot make sense of it. He thinks he says something but he can't

hear himself beyond the ringing silence crowding his ears. Slowly sound comes back, booming laughter that comes from everywhere, screams all around him, the thunk as Eddie's body lands far away and amid all of it a voice desperate and clawing and quiet - *Richie*

Disbelief permeates everything he sees and hears. Like a dream Richie feels every pinch of panic watching blood pump from the hole in Eddie's chest like a spring, but something niggling in his stomach urges him to doubt. It will be ok. He will be ok. It has happened but it hasn't. Pain so fresh and sharp would gut him, surely. He wouldn't be able to walk, wouldn't be able to hold his jacket against the wound and touch Eddie's face, listen to him tell a bad joke as life drains from him. If this were real it would be him who was dead. Real life wouldn't make such a mistake.

He joins the others to kill the monster because in this dream he has the courage and the anger to avenge Eddie, even if it's just pretend. He rips off It's arm and crushes It's heart with sickening delight, swept up by his hatred he almost forgets to go back to Eddie, to wake them both up from the nightmare.

It still isn't real. No matter what they say to him it isn't real. He screams at them, screams for Eddie because they don't understand that he can't wake Eddie up if they leave him down there. None of them will wake up. They drag him away and he pulls against them with everything he has. He wants to bury himself into the rubble - if you die in a dream then finally you wake.

The quarry is sparkling and Richie takes direction, follows suit because it's easiest. The light is blinding bright and he waits for the impact, to wake up back at the Town House when his body breaches the water. It shoots up his nose and he chokes when he surfaces, swimming to rest on a submerged rock. Why does he feel so tired if he's asleep?

Part of the nightmare is how happy they are. There is a palpable aura of peace surrounding every one of them, and the pitying embrace they fold him in only makes him cry harder, because why don't they understand? Why can't they wake up? How can they manage to smile or laugh or do anything other than sob and sob with grief? Even without his glasses, he doesn't miss the loving glow around Ben and

Bev, the way they surface together, locked into a permanent orbit. For a moment he has the hateful urge to dive after them, rip them apart, and scream that it isn't real. Their love isn't any more real than Eddie's death and if anyone could just listen they would see. But he's tired and hollow and pressed so thin he can hardly swim out - Mike's careful hand on his back as he guides him onto the shore.

"This isn't real," Richie says, watching Ben pack up Eddie's things into his suitcase. Richie's holding the shirt Eddie was stabbed in, blood spilled down the front in long drips.

Ben sighs, and turns around with a soft expression. "You're probably in shock, it's a pretty common reaction—"

"I'm not in *shock*, Ben. This isn't real. This isn't happening."

Ben's hand lands over Richie's, steadying where he didn't know he'd been shaking. "I'm so sorry, Rich," he says. "Do you want me to do it?"

Richie shakes his head. They'd decided they needed to burn some of Eddie's things, just the ones he touched or wore while he was with them, lest they get pinned for a murder they can never explain.

"No," Richie says. He's not sure what it means that they asked him to be the one to do it. Maybe they felt it was his right. He almost laughs that the secret he always feared was never a secret at all. Of course they knew. Of course. Most of them are packed up already, waiting downstairs for cabs to airports that will take them away to homes and money and friends and love and relief. He watches flames lick up the sides of a dumpster in a Derry alley, alone and breathless. He picks up a shard of glass from the scattered debris and cuts into his palm. For a second he thinks he might snap back to thirteen years old, frightened and empowered and swearing his life to protect his friends, hand cupped in the palm of the person he loves. He opens his eyes against the pain but he's still in the alley. He sleeps without dreams all the way back to LA.

After a month he decides he can never say anything about it, not even to the Losers. A 5150 would make things a lot harder in the end. He can be miserable at home or miserable at a ward. Whether he's really crazy or not doesn't matter much. Either way he doesn't have much interest in 'getting better' if that means putting it behind him, accepting that Eddie died so Richie could live and it all be for nothing. This big empty house. His wasted career. Missed calls skipped meals gray light inching over his face as he lies in bed letting the hours pass unmoved.

He has a moment, two months in, when he tracks down Myra and flies to New York to stand outside her door with his fist poised to knock. He came here to ask her in earnest. *You loved him. Is any of this real to you either? Tell me you see what I see. Tell me it's not. Tell me you're not.* But before he can rap his knuckles against the wood his courage dies at the thought of her opening the door and asking who he is. The reality that he was no one to Eddie. A forgotten face from childhood, a late night miscalculation during a midlife crisis. To see Eddie's things inside, photographs of his face smiling on his wedding day, his coat still hung on the hook makes him turn around and get a cab straight to the airport. He waits at the terminal for seven hours and every time he blinks he wishes he were awake.

Even if he's not a celebrity anymore he still has the pull of money, a name half-recognized, and it's easier than it should be to get three different scrips from three different doctors for the highest dose of oxycodone that's legally prescribable.

He takes them four at a time until the bottles are empty. He doesn't want room for doubt. The taste is so acrid he almost gags. It'll be over soon. Soon. He doesn't bother with a note. He read what Stan's said, little lines that felt meant just for him about holding on to the one you love. There's no one left he has anything to say to. They wouldn't believe him anyway if he did. It was always supposed to end like this, he thinks. Beverly saw it. They'll all die one way or another. Why waste time? He lies back on his bed and waits for his vision to tilt and swarm black. It's taking too long to die. *It is real*, a voice from nowhere says. *It's real and it got you. It got you both. It'll get you all.* He can't lift his head, can feel bile rising in his throat and his chest seizing tight. Like water washing over him he is damp with fear

then drowned. *It got you. It got you. It got you.* Somewhere, a laugh. He's choking on his vomit and his heart is stalling, stalling, starting, stalling. *It got you. I got you.*

“—Wake up! Hey!”

Everything is sharp and freezing and heavy. His vision is fading from white to strobed dark, a face hovering over him with delight.

“Yeah, yeah there he is, buddy! Hey, Richie, listen, I think I got it man! I think I killed it!”

Richie can't feel his limbs but he moves them anyway. He reaches out with every ounce of strength he has and pulls Eddie against his chest, knocking them both breathless.

“Rich—”

The worst sound he can hear would be Eddie's triumph. He knows what comes next.

“Rich it's ok, I got—”

Richie rolls them to the side and Eddie screams as his arm is gouged by the claw plunging into the ground. Screams all around them, Eddie howling into Richie's neck, but Richie is weightless counting every breath like a blessing. He's awake. They're all awake.

Richie's yellow shirt is turned a dark brown from where it's tied around Eddie's arm, staunching the blood flow as best as possible.

Richie didn't think Eddie would agree to swim in dirty water with two open wounds but he'd said it was better than letting sewer water fester inside of them. They jumped at the same time, Richie watching him the whole way down.

After the initial whooping and hollering and fuck yeah-ing over their success, the six of them pair off to separate ends of the quarry. This time Richie has it in him to smile as Ben and Bev swim off alone, ducking under the surface together. Him and Eddie head into a sunny spot where Richie can feel the ground touch his feet. He doesn't realize Eddie is treading water until he grabs his arm for balance and Richie ushers them closer to the shore.

Despite the relief, Richie has been avoiding this. It's hard to look at Eddie full on. Memory warps the image of his face into one with blood dripping down his lips, calling his name shaky and pained. How fair is it to dump the weight of three months worth of grief onto someone who's alive and trying to have a normal conversation?

"I can't believe we fuckin' did it," Eddie says, a puff of laughter coming out with his disbelief.

"You're the one who figured it out."

Eddie ducks his head, shy. "Sort of. Only at the last second."

"It worked."

"I had help," he says, looking right at Richie and he's biting his lip like he's gearing up to say something else. Richie interrupts him because if Eddie thanks him for saving his life he doesn't think he'll be able to keep it together.

"So, about the other morning," Richie starts. One terrifying thing at a time.

Eddie looks stricken. He pulls his arms from the water to wrap around himself, rocking on his heels. "Oh, um, yeah, don't worry about it—"

"No, I didn't mean—I just wanted to like, uh, apologize. For being weird."

Eddie exhales, expression moving quickly in uncertainty. "Me too, I don't know what the fuck was wrong with me."

"Ok," Richie says. He doesn't mean it to sound harsh, he's just not sure if he should be bracing for impact as his heart gets gently shattered or if he should propose a toast. "I just want to, um." His breath is hitching, he remembers vomit choked in his throat and wishing beyond anything that he could see that face again. "Fuck, sorry." He swipes at his eyes. To himself, he says, "Get it together, come on."

"Rich, it's ok—"

"Not really," Richie's voice cracks. "I just. I've fucked this up enough times I can't waste another—"

"Richie, what are you talking about?"

There's unmistakable fear in Eddie's eyes and Richie has to look away. He's already said too much. The pain of his months - moments - spent in the deadlights feels more real than it did when he was living it. Eddie here, breathing, mostly intact and looking like he wants nothing more than to reach for an inhaler that's not there - is past overwhelming. How many hours did he spend dreaming about a second chance and now he's here, fucking it up again.

When his fear has him choking and quiet, Eddie breaks the silence and asks, "How did you know to move us back there?"

Richie sighs. "I just knew."

"How?" He's looking right at Richie, voice a breath away from trembling. "Did you...did you see something?"

Richie remembers burning the tips of his fingers as he pulled Eddie's shirt out of the dumpster, trying to stamp out the flame before it was gone. Why did he ever agree to let go of him? How did they ever convince him to leave?

Eddie puts his arms around Richie and Richie's reminded of how brave he's always been. A pool of warmth spreads from the center of his chest and extends to every part where Eddie touches him. Richie

holds him too, hard at first until Eddie grunts in pain, so he loosens and lets his fingers curl into Eddie's sides. He is solid. He is warm, living. They are awake. His chest hitches and his hand goes to the back of Eddie's head, holding him in place. Tears come and what's there to be embarrassed of, they've all seen him cry here before anyway - all of them except Eddie. He has a moment to panic that when he lets go he'll wake up and it'll start all over again. The light, the dark, the blood. Or maybe the pills worked and this is his reward.

He pulls back and barely registers the glint of tears caught in Eddie's lashes.

"Can you punch me in the face real quick?"

Eddie blinks. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Just—" He gestures to a spot on his chin. "Right here. Give it your best shot."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I need to make sure this is really happening."

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Sorry my multiple stab wounds aren't 'real' enough for you."

"Hm. I see your point."

"I know I'm lucky I'm not dead but nobody else has any fucking major injuries."

"I think my brain is kinda broken, if that helps."

"What, you don't think I have any psychological trauma from this shit?"

"Alright, alright I get it." Richie leans his head to get a better look at the bandage, a spot of red glowing out from the center. "We should probably take you to the hospital at some point."

"Is it bad?"

Richie manages to tamp down his trembling when he holds Eddie's chin between his thumb and forefinger. Stubble is growing in, tickling his fingertips as he tilts Eddie's jaw to the side.

"Well?" Eddie asks, voice small and strained. "What's the damage?"

Richie runs his thumb over the gauze, wet and saturated. When he looks at Eddie, his eyes are fixed on Richie's mouth.

"You're," the words choke in Richie's throat. "You look—"

There's a loud whistle from behind them, Eddie's eyes darting to the sound. Richie turns to see Bill and Mike swimming toward them, smiles devoid of all subtlety.

"Beep beep, you fuckers," Richie says.

Mike holds up his hands from the water. "Hey, I didn't say anything, Bill was the one whistling!"

"What about those two?" Richie nods in the direction of Bev and Ben, who have been submerged long enough they ought to be worried about them. "They're over there sucking face like fucking leeches."

They give the happy couple thirty more seconds before Mike swims over and hauls them back. Richie insists they get McDonalds from the drive thru - on foot - to which they concede before heading back to the Town House. Richie and Eddie don't make it inside - they take Richie's rental to an urgent care in Bangor and they snicker over the nurse doing her best to be polite despite their smell.

When they return, Bev and Ben are nowhere to be found. Bill is sitting on the floor of his room on another tense phone call while the shower runs beyond him. As triumphant as he feels, the idea of showering alone still feels terrifying to Richie. Maybe he can convince Eddie to let him shower with the door open at least. He isn't sure what's more vulnerable - possibly being spotted nude by the guy you're in love with or admitting that his presence alone is enough to calm your fears of certain death. They hadn't talked about going up to Eddie's room together. Richie let his feet carry him in silence in the exact path of Eddie's all the way from the parking lot, up the

stairs, through the hall, right to Eddie's bed where they sit beside one another, hands flat on the mattress between them. On a scale of cute to corny how bad would it be to lay his pinky over Eddie's?

"Um" — they both start at the same time, kick starting a twenty second fumble where they try to urge each other to go first. Eddie finally relents.

"Ok, well. I guess I just wanted to know if you're still, like, into me. Or if you were just panicking because you thought we'd all die if I left or. I don't know. Maybe you're having a trauma-induced gay panic that disappears as soon as you're safe and back in the real world, because that happens, so I just need to know what I'm dealing with. Feel free to interrupt me at any time."

Richie, in the opposite of a smooth move, laughs. The kind you almost try to stifle but truly can't be bothered. He knows it'll unsettle Eddie but he's too relieved to give a damn. *He's nervous that I might be having second thoughts? Me? Big gay Richie?*

"You don't have to be a jerk about it," Eddie pulls his hand from between them and tucks it away between crossed arms.

"No, no. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*, seriously. I'm just like, fucking baffled over here that it's not obvious to you."

Eddie's look is dubious. "Think you could say it out loud for me, Rich?"

Richie groans and rolls his eyes. He pulls Eddie's hand back and laces it with his own.

"Does this clear things up?" he asks.

"Not really." Eddie's stupid little frown. Too fucking cute.

In his exaggerated, long suffering groan he looks at the floor and says as quickly and mumbly as possible: "Yes I like you."

"What was that?"

" Yes, I said. Yes I like you. Ok? Are we good? We like each other?"

For all his whining, it's more than worth it when quiet, shy relief breaks onto Eddie's face. He's biting his lip like his smile might offend. Richie would tackle him if he weren't too shaky and weak to manage it.

"So," Richie starts, gaining blind momentum in his shock. "Are we like, a *thing* now?"

Eddie huffs a laugh through his nose and glances back. "Yeah, Rich. We're a thing."

"Cool. I've never had a *thing* before."

Eddie scoffs. "Fuck off, yes you have."

"I really haven't."

"What about—" He shuts his eyes and snaps his fingers together. "What's her name, the lady comedian, blond hair, I think she does stand up too—"

"Amy?" It'd be funny if his attempts at heterosexuality hadn't been so public. "No—god no. Ha— *no* . She kind of hates my guts."

"Oh, sorry." He looks genuinely embarrassed, perhaps the revelation that Eddie had ever been paying attention settling in. "My wife, she's addicted to those gossip magazines, I thought I saw a headline once about..."

Richie's not thinking so much about the reminder of Eddie's wife (perhaps not allowing himself to think about it a more apt description), caught up in the memory of how horribly he'd failed a test no one asked him to take. Or maybe they had. It was his job to live up to the expectations. He thought since he'd talked the talk the walk couldn't be *that* difficult. His whole act is about not actually caring about the girl's feelings. The problem was that women are humans and Richie's too decent to fuck someone over for real. Except re-negging just made it worse, as far as his publicist was concerned.

"Yeah, we went out a few times, I just. I don't know. I guess I wanted to be sure...of myself. If that makes sense."

Eddie nods. "Mm. Yeah. Totally."

Richie's trying to decipher the implications of 'totally' when Eddie interrupts with a cough.

"So is it like, exclusively guys for you or—"

"Uh yeah, I think so. I mean. You can ask the women I've dated, I think they'd pretty confidently tell you yes."

"Right, yeah."

He shouldn't ask. Not if he doesn't really want to know the answer. "What about you," Richie says. "Are you...?"

Eddie runs a hand over his face. Richie's heart stills in this moment. He bargains with himself over how willing he is to be someone's secret. How comfortable he is with complicity, how deserving Eddie's wife is of having her husband step out on her. He thinks he'd hate it, but wouldn't ever say no.

"I honestly don't know. I don't—No, I don't know."

"Ok," Richie says, giving Eddie's hand a squeeze. Their sweat squelches between their palms. "That's ok. You don't have to know."

Eddie only nods, his mouth getting smaller and smaller as he stares at a spot on the carpet. Richie's thinking of a joke to break the tension, something about not being sure himself considering what a great time he had with Mrs. K back in the—

"We've only had sex eleven times."

"*What?* "

"Shhhh!" Eddie covers Richie's mouth with his hand, eyes darting to the door. "Shut up, god—"

Richie wrenches the hand away. "Are you kidding me? You said you were married like 15 years— *Eleven times?* And you're not sure if you —"

“God, Richie, I don’t know, ok? I don’t fucking know. It wasn’t her fault, I just. I don’t know. Everything makes me so fucking anxious it makes it kind of hard to be in the mood.”

Richie thinks of them making out at the Town House, a few days or a decade ago, feeling Eddie hard against him as their legs slotted together in this very bed.

“Right...”

“I have a prescription for it, it’s actually pretty common among males our age.”

Richie sighs up at the ceiling. “Jesus fucking christ.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Whatever modicum of sympathy Richie had for that woman has dissolved to nothing. He imagines the excruciating intricacies of a marriage with someone like that. All the ways she might rationalize to herself why her husband can’t satisfy her, and what she might say or do to make him believe it too.

“Sorry if that’s like, a deal breaker or—I don’t know, like un-sexy or something.” Eddie looks as small as he did back in the cistern, convinced he was worth nothing to any of them. It pulls at something in his gut; it’s heartbreaking, but completely absurd too.

Richie barks a laugh. “*Un-sexy*? Are you kidding me?”

“Can you please shut the fuck up, asshole?”

“I’m sorry, seriously I’m sorry, I just, um.” Richie’s still working out how to translate nervous laughter into something intelligible. “No, it’s not a deal breaker. I don’t think you need to worry about me finding you...un-sexy.”

Eddie blushes, like a cartoon they color so quickly a rosy red. “How the fuck am I supposed to know that, jesus christ. Give me a break.”

Richie pulls their hands into his lap, strokes Eddie's knuckles with his free hand. He wants to realize a hundred thousand fantasies from his youth where he kisses each knuckle one by one, every kiss gentler than the last, but his lips are chapped and frankly the whole thing is sort of... gay. Which is good, except Eddie just said Richie might be his one exception and he doesn't want to push him farther than he already has.

"That doesn't matter," Richie says, finding Eddie's eyes.

"It's fucking embarrassing." If he hunched into himself any more he'd be an armadillo, Richie thinks.

"It's really not. It's not your fault."

"It is, ok? And yeah, it is my fault. I kind of, lied. A lot. To her about it. The excuses got so stupid I'm pretty sure she started playing along just to make herself feel better."

"Jesus that's dark, dude."

"Thanks, asshole."

"No, I just mean like. That sucks. You deserve more than that."

"Thanks."

Eddie's socked toe is brushing Richie's sole in soft strokes. Richie is overcome with the urge to do several things all at once: scream in manic delight, retreat in self-conscious fear, launch himself at Eddie mouth first, lie down and hold him until someone comes to find them, brush Eddie's cheeks and eyelashes and ears with his fingertips until it gets dark, and flick his forehead just to see his expression flash into anger faster than the speed of sound. The last impulse is the one he used to follow as a teenager, religiously. Now he tries earnestness and embraces the outcome, however disappointing and awkward it may be.

"Hey, um, we don't have to like, do anything you're not comfortable with."

Eddie's head jerks up. "What?"

“Just like, if you’re not sure if this is for you, or like if you don’t want to do that kind of thing—”

“No! I do, I do.” His hand squeezes Richie’s so tight he thinks something might break. Eddie won’t look at him - Richie thinks for the nth time maybe it’s over for real, no matter how much Eddie says he wants it. He wonders when that certainty will begin to fade. Maybe at the altar.

“Ok.” Richie squeezes back, hoping it’ll stop their mutual trembling.

“Yeah. Sorry. I mean I’ll probably have a panic attack at some point and send you running for the hills but I’m not like, *afraid* afraid.”

“Good to know.”

“Yeah.”

Eddie’s lashes bat against his cheeks as he stares down at their hands. Richie knows somewhere trapped in 1989, lying awake in the dark on someone else’s floor, there’s a deeply lonely kid who wants nothing more than to kiss his best friend and tell the world to burn if they think it’s wrong. He thinks that kid deserves to be happy.

“So. Um,” Richie catches Eddie’s gaze, the way his eyes open in surprise, then flick down to Richie’s lips. “Can I kiss you now?”

“Mhmm.”

He leans in and everything else whites out.

Notes for the Chapter:

There's gonna be another chapter but it might be a minute until it's updated so I'm leaving it as "completed" for now... tumblr @ killhadrian

Author's Note:

Btw I'm not a fucking homophobe so no, Eddie doesn't die at the end in this canon divergence duh.